Intelligence in Public Media

Need to Know
Karen Cleveland (Ballantine, 2018), 290 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Readers have certain expectations of spy novels. The hero usually is drawn into the hunt for a traitor or, occasionally, has to find a way to stop a villain planning some unimaginable catastrophe. The ensuing action takes him from one locale to another—the more exotic the better—with narrow escapes and forced, at some point, to rely on the aid of a woman he may or may not be able to trust. In the end, he returns to where the action began and unmasks the traitor or stops the plot. Everyone, including the reader, is satisfied.

Sometimes, of course, an author tries to break free of these conventions. Len Deighton did this in his Bernard Samson novels by making his hero an everyman, one with a working wife, children, and in-laws to juggle as he went about his intelligence work. But almost all spy fiction, it seems, is written by men. What, then, happens when a woman reimagines the genre, as former CIA analyst Karen Cleveland has done in her first novel, *Need to Know*?

The action starts off conventionally enough. Vivian Miller is a brilliant, hard-working CIA counterintelligence analyst who has developed a computer algorithm for identifying Russian illegals (annoyingly called sleepers). After years of effort, the hunt has finally led to the laptop of an SVR handler; breaking into it from her desk at CIA Headquarters (don't ask why an SVR illegals officer would leave his laptop connected to the internet, because Cleveland doesn't bother to say), she finds a folder of photos of illegals in the United States. Clicking on it, Vivian stares into the face of Matt, her husband of a decade and father of their four young children.

With the spy revealed on page 14, what's left to keep you reading? Plenty, as it turns out. Does Matt truly love Vivian and the kids, or is it all a sham? Is he coming clean with Vivian and working with her to save their family from the clutches of the SVR, or is he manipulating her for Moscow's benefit, using her as a pawn in his espionage? If Matt has become a good guy, will the SVR blackmail Vivian into treason? Will the Russians—the

fiends!—go so far as to slowly and gruesomely kill the children to make Vivian cooperate? Will the FBI arrive in time to save the day?

Cleveland is careful, too, to make *Need to Know* a spy story for our times. The Russians are back, as evil as ever, and it's not just Matt—Vivian learns that his entire extended family are all illegals, some of the hundreds (gasp!) at large in the United States. Even better, Cleveland knows how to tell a story. As with all good contemporary spy novels, the plot moves along at breakneck speed, without a wasted word, and Vivian narrates the story in the present tense to give it an even greater sense of urgency. Every section of each chapter ends with a cliffhanger, as do the chapters themselves. Cleveland keeps the pages turning so fast, and the book is so hard to put down, that it takes a while to realize the plot makes almost no sense. (At one point, an omniscient narrator has to intervene and supply a few critical details that keep the story from breaking down completely.)

Most interesting, though, is what Cleveland says about women working in intelligence. Vivian's brains and determination make her a promising character at first, but Cleveland then loads on her fragile shoulders all the burdens and anxieties of the modern, American upper middle class, career mom. Money is tight because Matt insisted on buying a house they couldn't quite afford because it was in a neighborhood with the best schools. Preparing to go back to work after her first child was born, Vivian recalls, she and Matt sent him "to the best day care center in the area, the one with the longest list of accreditations, a flawless reputation." Still, despite securing such ideal care, she laments, "Nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of handing Luke off to a woman I didn't know . . . I broke down the moment the door to the infant room closed." (133) Through the rest of the story, Vivian worries not only about how to save her family from the Russians, but about missing dinner with the kids and whether she ever will be a good mother.

Working desperately to save her children from cruel deaths just doesn't seem to make the grade.

As conflicted as Vivian is between motherhood and career, she's equally torn about Matt. Learning his true identity, she realizes that they met not by accident, but because he was targeting her. Vivian realizes that she can no longer trust Matt, no matter how much he reassures her of his love and that they will get through this together. Or does she? One minute she clearly sees his manipulations, and the next she is denying or excusing them. The result is that she rides an emotional roller coaster, with the resulting agony clouding her judgment at every turn and leading her to accept Matt's explanations and instructions. "I trust you, I hope you can see that now," she tells Matt near the end, still desperate to believe him after seemingly endless rounds of deceit. (264) Thus does Cleveland's attempt to recast the spy novel veer toward a supermarket paperback romance.

Ultimately, this is the problem with *Need to Know*. For someone who has 10 years of counterespionage experi-ence and is smart enough to figure out how to track down illegals and break into SVR computers, Vivian has a surprising amount of trouble understanding what is going on in front of her. That, and her collapse in judgment and confidence the first time she's challenged to do the work that she's been trained for—catch spies—makes for a damning portrait of mothers as counterintelligence offi-cers. If anyone takes this seriously, Cleveland will have set back the cause of working moms in intelligence by at least three decades.

Fortunately, though, *Need to Know* is too unbelievable to be taken so seriously. It is entertainment and nothing more. But Cleveland clearly has talent as a storyteller and enough knowledge of the intelligence world that she could, if she wants to get rid of the silliness, put togeth-er a serious spy novel or superior thriller. Perhaps in a decade we will look at *Need to Know* as Cleveland's learning experience, the first step in a successful post-CIA writing career.

❖　❖　❖

John Ehrman is a senior analyst in CIA's Directorate of Analysis focusing on counterintelligence. He is a frequent and award-winning contributor.